

School Librarians: The Forgotten Partners

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Collaboration between special and general educators is not only essential; the 2004 Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates this collaboration. Special educators must forge partnerships with general educators to create inclusive school environments for all students. Although collaboration between these professionals has increased while they address such issues as accountability, achievement, and effective use of dwindling resources (Stayton & McCollum, 2002), these collaborative efforts often leave out a key player: The school librarian is this forgotten partner.

General and special education teachers rely on the school library because of its diversity of resources, the positive association that it has for many students, and the perception that it is an environment conducive to individualized attention (Zambone, Smith Canter, Voytecki, Jeffs, & Jones, 2009). In addition, many educators use the library for a variety of other reasons, including the following:

- Allows students to spend class time in the school library to complete individual or small-group projects.



- Reduces classroom disruptions.
- Gives students an opportunity to focus or calm down.
- Provides access to alternative curriculum/instruction.
- Rewards positive behavior.

Despite the value of the school library, neither special education teachers nor general education teachers typically form working partnerships with school librarians.

Taking the First Step Toward Collaboration: A Vignette

Ms. Murphy, the new special education resource teacher at Ivy League Elementary School, entered the restaurant and walked toward her table of friends for their bimonthly Teachers on the Town dinner. Her smile broadened in anticipation of a respite from school talk. However, her smile slowly faded when she discovered that the conversation was all about school and children whom the teachers were finding challenging. It was not that her job was worse than that of any other special educator, but she did not feel the professional connections that the others at the table did. Ivy League Elementary seemed to be a school with a strong tradition of separateness and an unspoken malaise when it came to teaching *all* children. She believed that most of the general education teachers in her school liked their students and teaching but the overall school climate did not espouse inclusionist principles and ideas for integrating students with special needs.

While the teachers' conversation progressed, Ms. Murphy found herself sharing a project idea and her need for the talents and organizational skills that could help her put it into action. She told her friends around the table that she wanted to create a multimedia presentation of each of her students engaged in age-appropriate learning activities and just acting like any child in the school. She envisioned each "minimovie" being a polished presentation with background music and a combination of still and moving video that showcased her students' strengths

and unique ways of learning. Her plan was to show these "Me Movies" to parents and professionals before any individualized education program (IEP) or placement meeting. Although she could see the promise of such a project, she felt totally overwhelmed. After hearing her predicament, her friends suggested that she ask the school librarian for help.

Ask the school librarian, Ms. Franklin, for help? Ms. Murphy had rarely talked with Ms. Franklin. In fact, Ms. Franklin was probably the one person in the school with whom she had not had much contact. She knew a little bit about what a school librarian might know because her college roommate had been a graduate student in library science; it seemed reasonable to think that Ms. Franklin probably had the audio/video editing skills and know-how that she lacked.

While she thought about a prospective partnership with Ms. Franklin, Ms. Murphy found herself wondering why she had not worked with her before. She realized that she had the distinct impression that Ms. Franklin did not seem very welcoming to her students or comfortable interacting with them—although Ms. Murphy's students often seemed to spend more time in the school library than in their general education classrooms.

The more she thought, the more she realized that she had gone out of her way to avoid interacting with Ms. Franklin because of her perception of Ms. Franklin's feelings toward her students. Ms. Murphy's students seemed to sit on the fringes of the room while Ms. Franklin was providing instruction or otherwise working with a particular class. However, if she pictured going to the school library to find Frankie or Tometha or one of her other students, they were usually quiet and doing something with books or on the computer. Ms. Franklin did seem very efficient and well-organized. She had even overheard her students talking positively about things they had seen or done while in the school library, in clear contrast to their anger or frustration at getting sent out of a classroom

because of their behavior or difficulties with particular lessons. Even their complaints about Ms. Franklin's rules were good-natured. Ms. Murphy realized that it was she who avoided Ms. Franklin. Perhaps her perception was wrong, and maybe she could work with Ms. Franklin.

What Does the Literature Say About School Librarians as Promising Partners?

Lonsdale (2003) reviewed more than 75 studies of school library media programs conducted during the past 60 years. These studies encompassed diverse research focuses, various methodologies, and a range of grade levels in the United States and other countries. Lonsdale concluded that school library media programs lead to increased student achievement as measured by state standardized tests. Further, the research reviewed in this area consistently indicated that school librarians and school library media programs had a positive effect on learning and cognition for typical students. Lonsdale also found evidence that the school librarian's availability to collaborate with general educators was a key factor in increased student achievement.

In another research study, Lance (2002) conducted a four-state investigation of the ways that school library media programs affect academic achievement. The activities of school librarians and the features of school library media programs that Lance identified as most positively influencing student achievement included the following:

- The school librarian plans and collaborates with classroom teachers to deliver instruction, teach information literacy, and provide individual tutoring to students in a flexible environment.
- The school librarian develops and manages quality collections to support the curriculum.
- The school library media program integrates state-of-the-art technology into the learning and teaching processes.

- The school librarian networks the school with other types of libraries, especially public libraries.
- A professional school librarian, who receives assistance from support personnel, staffs the school library.
- The principal supports the school library program.
- Collaboration occurs between the school librarian and teachers.
- Information technology extends the reach of the school library program into classrooms and labs.
- A well-organized and formally requested budget supports the school library and its programs.

Todd and Kuhlthau (2005) investigated the positive attributes of school library media programs from the perspective of the student clientele. In their research on the benefits of school library media programs, Todd and Kuhlthau surveyed 13,123 school-aged students in Ohio to ascertain what they perceived to be helpful elements of their school library media programs. The 48-statement survey addressed various aspects of obtaining and using information, the students' use of computers, their reading interests and proficiency, their lives outside school, schoolwork in general, and academic achievement. The survey indicated that 99.4% of the students believed that the school library and the school librarian helped them with their learning both in and out of school.

Todd and Kuhlthau's (2005) findings further revealed that a proactive school librarian is imperative for a successful school library. Along with assuring that the library is a dynamic and relevant learning environment, the school librarian's "personal engagement with students to initiate and enable learning and achievement is a critical component of an effective school library" (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005, p. 1). That study also included unexpected findings of interest. For example, students viewed media centers as places for technology use rather than as places for reading. Students ranked general reading interests as sixth in order of importance for school library benefits,

and they perceived that access to computer technology was a more important function of the school library (Whelan, 2004). Additional analysis of study findings indicated that more girls than boys reported the school library to be helpful. Likewise, more African American students than students in other ethnic groups reported that the school library was helpful.

Even though the previously cited research does not provide evidence of a direct connection between the school librarian and the success of students with special needs, a partnership between the school librarian and special educators could similarly influence the achievement of this group of students. The extensive findings regarding the school librarian's impact on the achievement of general education students compels special educators to explore collaboration on behalf of students with special needs. The first step in this exploration is to examine the

complementarities between the roles and standards of special educators and those of school librarians.

Special Educators and School Librarians: Common Ground for Collaboration

Building collaborative partnerships requires that special educators understand the role of school librarians and identify areas in which their responsibilities align or complement each other. For example, one responsibility of the school librarian is to advocate for an information skills curriculum to assure appropriate learning experiences for all children (American Library Association/American Association of School Librarians, ALA/AASL, 2003). Advocating for appropriate curriculum and instruction and helping students with special needs develop the information skills that they need to learn content and complete assignments are two of the responsibilities of special educators (Council for Exceptional Children, CEC, 2009). By partnering with each other,

special educators and school librarians can help each other meet these responsibilities. Furthermore, collective expertise occurs when special educators and school librarians integrate their knowledge and skills on behalf of the students. An examination of each profession's standards shows multiple areas of alignment.

Professional standards charge school librarians to be "information literacy experts . . . modeling effective use of informational skills to solve problems, pursue knowledge, and serendipitously explore the world of information" (ALA/AASL, 2003, p. 15). This charge encompasses three main categories of responsibilities—information access and storage, teaching and learning, and program administration:

- Information access and storage involves evaluating, retrieving, and organizing information to create an information-rich environment that

Students viewed media centers as places for technology use rather than as places for reading.

supports the interests and inquiry of students (ALA/AASL, 2003).

- Teaching and learning requires that school librarians teach across the curriculum and across all students in a school, thereby enabling them to contribute breadth and depth to curriculum design and a diverse perspective to instructional resource development.
- To meet the responsibilities of program administration, school librarians manage school library programs, media services, and staff to contribute to the school's goals, culture, and climate (Haycock, 1999).

A valuable contribution that special education makes to education is its focus on specialized instructional approaches to individualize educational programs for specific children, using their strengths to help with their challenges. In addition, special educators are advocates of children whom educational systems often do not serve well, except through unique

Table 1. Complementary Professional Standards: School Librarians and Special Educators

| School Librarians | Special Educators |
|---|--|
| Create an information-rich environment that supports students' interests and inquiry. | Shape environments to encourage the independence, self-motivation, self-direction, personal empowerment, and self-advocacy of individuals with exceptional learning needs. Help general education colleagues integrate individuals with exceptional learning needs in general education environments, and engage them in meaningful learning activities and interactions. |
| Promote information access and delivery; evaluating, retrieving, and organizing information. | Promote positive learning; enhance learning of critical thinking, problem-solving, and performance skills of individuals with exceptional learning needs; and modify learning environments for individuals with exceptional learning needs. |
| Promote teaching and learning across the curriculum and across all students. | Select, adapt, and use a repertoire of evidence-based instructional strategies to individualize instruction for individuals with exceptional learning needs to increase knowledge and skills across environments; and increase students' self-awareness, self-management, self-control, self-reliance, and self-esteem. Remain familiar with augmentative, alternative, and assistive technologies to support and enhance communication and literacy of individuals with exceptional needs. |
| Engage collaboratively and bring a unique perspective to curriculum and instructional resource development. | Facilitate instructional planning in a collaborative context to design appropriate learning and performance accommodations and modifications for students with exceptional learning needs in multidisciplinary academic subject matter content of the general curriculum. |
| Manage programs, services, and staff to contribute to the school's goals, culture, and climate; document the way in which the library media curriculum is significant to the success of students; advocate for information skills curriculum to assure appropriate learning experiences for all students. | Assure that the needs of individuals with exceptional learning needs are addressed throughout schooling; serve as a resource in understanding the laws and policies relevant to individuals with exceptional learning needs; promote and advocate the learning and well-being of individuals with exceptional learning needs across a wide range of settings and a range of different learning experiences. |

arrangements (CEC, 2009). It is possible to group the responsibilities of special educators into three areas—managing educational environments, teaching and learning, and program administration:

- Managing educational environments requires special educators to establish environmental conditions within classrooms and schools that facilitate and support their students' development and learning. In doing so, special educators are responsible for marshaling the resources that students with exceptionalities need for success.
- Teaching and learning requires that special educators determine the

needs of each student and use their knowledge and skills to address each child's learning needs individually. Special educators must serve as advocates to ensure that each child receives an individualized, appropriate education.

- To meet the responsibility of program administration, special educators must provide the leadership and direction needed to ensure that schools and other educational organizations have the capacity to accommodate the diverse needs of each student with exceptionalities.

Table 1 depicts the alignment and agreement of the professional standards among school librarians (ALA/

AASL, 2003) and special educators (CEC, 2009). The two professions have very complementary standards which further support the potential for creating powerful and effective collaborative partnerships between special educators and school librarians.

Special Educators: Taking Action to Create Collaborative Partnerships

According to information that the authors obtained from informal interviews and conversations with school librarians and special educators during workshops and conference presentations, special educators and school librarians know very little about each other's roles and responsibilities.



Furthermore, most professionals informally commented that they have had limited experience working with each other. This information was surprising because of the similarity between the professional standards of school librarians and those of special educators and the corresponding service delivery traits and roles in the school. Knowledge of each other's profession may surely contribute to a working relationship; however, school librarians and special educators can only achieve true partnerships in improving the education of students with special needs if all parties involved take part in shared and focused endeavors. The school librarian can certainly be an important part of a special education team, but special education teachers can only access their potential contributions through collaboration.

Special educators who want to build a collaborative partnership with the

school librarian should facilitate the following action steps:

- Create a foundation for mutual respect and understanding.
- Create a focused purpose for collaboration.
- Generate a written plan for collaboration.
- Plan collaborative activities of mutual responsibility.
- Record, document, and celebrate collaboration.

Following these action steps can help create an atmosphere of true collaborative partnership and improve services for students with special needs. Figure 1 highlights the purpose of each action step and presents several strategies and tactics that can help educators implement them. The action steps and their respective strategies and tactics are not directional but are instead cooperative endeavors that spe-

cial educators can introduce and facilitate. Special educators should always remember that any effort that they make to establish a collaborative partnership is an activity of shared involvement and that school librarians are their partners in improving the education of children with exceptionalities.

Effective collaboration is a key component in educational programming for children with special needs. The suggestions highlighted in Figure 1 are only a small sampling of possible tactics and strategies that special educators can facilitate to include school librarians as working partners in educating students with exceptionalities. The following continuation of the vignette illustrates how one special educator was able to begin the process of creating an effective collaborative partnership with a school's librarian by employing just one of the suggested strategies in the first step: Create a foundation for mutual respect and understanding.

Creating a Foundation for Mutual Respect and Understanding: The Vignette Continues

Ms. Murphy left her dinner with a resolution to build a relationship with Ms. Franklin and create the "Me Movies" that she had always wanted. She knew that she had to take the first step to break down barriers and create a foundation of mutual respect and understanding. She believed that this step was important and had to be accomplished before she could even broach the idea about working together on a project.

"What could she do?" Ms. Murphy wondered. "If I only know her as the school librarian but I really don't know her as a person, then it stands to reason that my students don't know her; and conversely, Ms. Franklin doesn't know me or my students."

Ms. Murphy decided that she and her students would hold a "Greet and Meet Important School Friends Tea" and that Ms. Franklin would be their guest of honor. Ms. Murphy, her students, and her students' parents set out to make their tea a special occasion.

Figure 1. Action Steps: Descriptions and Implementation

ACTION STEP: *Create a foundation for mutual respect and understanding.*

Purpose: A true collaborative relationship only exists if the parties involved have established a mutually respectful bond that is based on an appreciation of each professional's specialized knowledge and skills, as well as recognition of areas of commonality (Correa, Jones, Thomas, & Morsink, 2005).

Examples of Implementation Strategies and Tactics

1. Conduct activities to meet the school librarian (e.g., meet-and-greet activities such as a hosting a "tea," personal letters of introduction from the special education teacher and students).
2. Get to know the school librarian (e.g., do some research about the school librarian, such as his or her alma mater, years at the school; create a short questionnaire).
3. Find out what the school librarian knows about the special education program (e.g., send out a short online survey, conduct a brief interview).

ACTION STEP: *Create a focused purpose for collaboration.*

Purpose: The basis for collaboration is equal partners working together for a shared purpose. Two crucial components of creating a shared vision and purpose are knowledge and experience.

Examples of Implementation Strategies and Tactics

1. Create a shared knowledge base by designing learning experiences and informational resources about special education and students with special needs for school librarians (e.g., generate an information booklet, electronic document, or podcast of an introduction to special education).
2. Create a shared knowledge base about the local district and the school's special education program (e.g., provide a directory of key special education personnel in the district and at the school level, design a scavenger hunt to learn more about the school's special education program).
3. Create and share an electronic resource toolkit on exceptionalities that school librarians can use to learn more about children with special needs.
4. Conduct miniworkshops on exceptionalities and special education.
5. Create effective experiences to promote the school librarian's appreciation and understanding of children with disabilities (e.g., share movies, poems, and stories that highlight individuals with exceptionalities and their lives; request that disability-specific literature and resource titles be added to the media collection).
6. Foster a personal connection between the school librarian and students with special needs in the school (e.g., create an "all about my class" video or student-generated PowerPoint introductions).
7. Teach and reinforce appropriate student behavior in the media center.
8. Assist the school librarian in designing differentiated orientation sessions for students to use the media center.

ACTION STEP: *Generate a written plan for collaboration.*

Purpose: The collaboration plan very simply states a general goal and then lists the steps that can be implemented to reach the goal.

Examples of Implementation Strategies and Tactics

1. Create a master calendar of planned collaborative activities.
2. Submit a written plan of collaboration to the school administrator.
3. To maximize resources, propose joint budget requests.
4. Submit collaborative grant proposals to secure additional funding to support materials and resources needed to promote inclusive participation in the media center (e.g., technology; differentiated reading items; accessible texts—audio books, readings available on computers, and Braille versions).
5. Create a shared work space that focuses on collaboration (e.g., shared whiteboard for collaborative communication and works in progress, post the steps of the collaborative action plan on the wall).

ACTION STEP: *Plan collaborative activities of mutual responsibility.*

Purpose: These activities involve teamwork and cooperation among professionals.

Examples of Implementation Strategies and Tactics

1. Collaborate with the school librarian to create resource materials about exceptionalities for all teachers in the school (e.g., informative multimedia CD, list of helpful web sites, directory of community resources).
2. Coordinate with the school librarian to establish an instructional resource center designed to assist teachers in meeting the diverse needs of students in their classes.
3. Work with the school librarian to create record-keeping matrices for students with special needs in the school (e.g., tracking student progress; monitoring IEP goals and dates; delineating instructional strengths, challenges, and needs).
4. Involve school librarian in the IEP process—development through implementation (e.g., select adaptive materials, provide instructional support).

ACTION STEP: *Record, document, and celebrate collaboration.*

Purpose: Formalizing collaborative efforts through the skillful use of concrete artifacts can help legitimize and reinforce collaborative activities.

Examples of Implementation Strategies and Tactics

1. Create an array of publicity materials showcasing collaborative activities (e.g., brochures, collaboration bulletin boards, collaborative newsletters to be shared with the school and district).
2. Acknowledge and show appreciation for collaborative efforts (e.g., reinforcement materials such as certificates; scrapbook highlighting collaborative projects to be displayed in the media center; student-generated letters of appreciation).

In addition to “fancy” invitations and other niceties, Ms. Murphy increased the probability that Ms. Franklin would

school library that held materials that would interest them. While the students sought out the library’s

Partnerships generate support, and support generates professional and personal well-being.

accept their invitation by making sure that the principal would also attend the tea. This act of inviting the principal might also secure assistance and support if Ms. Murphy and Ms. Franklin worked together on the multimedia project in the future.

In addition to working out logistical plans and additional details, Ms. Murphy investigated how her students had acted negatively toward Ms. Franklin in the past, and she incorporated and designed many learning activities and lessons into preparing for the tea. This classroom event became a multidisciplinary learning unit covering a wide array of knowledge and skills.

When the day arrived, everyone was ready to be involved in the class event. Students were well-versed in good manners, and they had rehearsed a little skit that demonstrated how they should behave in the library. After that skit, the students stood up and made a short speech introducing themselves, related some interesting personal information, and concluded by saying something about what they wanted to learn or do in the school library/media center.

Another activity, “Interview a Helpful Professional . . . The School Librarian,” afforded the students an opportunity to ask Ms. Franklin questions. Although the conversation was not a natural one, the activity definitely could create a foundation for more natural conversational exchanges. The tea culminated with the students’ presenting a book of PowerPoint slides with pictures of each student and a little bit about their talents, interests, strengths, and challenges. The next day, when Ms. Murphy brought her class to use the school library, she noted that Ms. Franklin used the PowerPoint book to greet each student and direct them toward areas of the

resources, Ms. Murphy and Ms. Franklin started a conversation.

Final Thoughts

In the preceding example, Ms. Murphy employed many activities and strategies that began to create a foundation of mutual respect. Ms. Murphy faced a situation with no history of collaboration and in which the school librarian had quite possibly had some negative interaction—and certainly Ms. Murphy had had misperceptions. Before this interaction, no foundation had existed to facilitate a basic collaboration, so Ms. Murphy had to reach out to the school librarian. Designing a unit of study around school libraries definitely deepened Ms. Murphy’s perception of who Ms. Franklin was and what she did. Having structured and purposeful time with Ms. Murphy’s students helped the school librarian create opportunities to form new perceptions of these students. Both Ms. Murphy and Ms. Franklin benefited from this first action step.

In addition to all the possible benefits to the students, collaboration benefits faculty in both measurable and immeasurable ways. Partnerships generate support, and support generates professional and personal well-being. It is well worth the time and effort for special educators to remember to investigate how school librarians can become valuable partners.

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